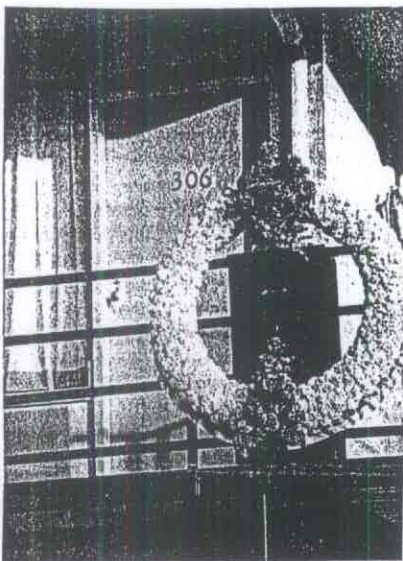




Room 306 in the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King stayed in Memphis, Tennessee. Photographs by Mary Ruth Robinson, an eighty-year-old African-American activist who lives in Memphis.

The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.

An interview with the Reverend James Lawson on January 28, 1996, by the editor of *Fellowship*.

RD: Jim, you were in Memphis when Dr. King was assassinated. What was your relationship to him, in the events prior to the assassination?

JL: From 1957 to 1968, Martin King and I were friends and colleagues, and brother pastors sharing a wide variety of experiences in the struggle of what I call the "King movement." I was also director of nonviolent education for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at Dr. King's request. From 1960-1972, I was a pastor in Memphis, Tennessee. I chaired the strategy committee for the sanitation strike, to plan the strike and the work and the movement in Memphis. And one of the strategies we began immediately was mass meetings to which we invited national leaders. I invited Dr. King to come speak in a mass meeting, and when he and I talked initially, he agreed.

We stayed in touch for weeks as he tried to juggle his schedule to decide when he would come. Because of our relationship, he identified himself with that movement, as being a part of the movement of the South.

RD: When did you begin to have questions about what became the accepted interpretation of the assassination of Dr. King?

JL: Well, it should be noted that during the strike there were all kinds of rumors and gossip, and threats everywhere. My own home was deluged with threats night and day. We had so many death threats that my wife, Dorothy, and I decided that we had to tell our oldest boy about them, even though John was just six years old.

RD: This was immediately prior to the assassination?

JL: This was throughout the strike. When King was "executed publicly"—which is what I sometimes call it, or "crucified," as I believe more clearly from my biblical understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus—I was suspicious almost from the beginning. There were a series of incidents that were passed off by the press and the FBI as "coincidental." They did not make sense. One of them was the report on the very first evening of a white Mustang escaping, that came over the police band. The escape was supposed to have been through north Memphis, diverting attention away from the scene of the killing. How did it get on the police band? They claimed it was a hoax.

Eyewitnesses who saw shots coming from the bushes below the rooming house were never called.

And the bushes were cut down and removed from the area!

King's original room—a secure ground floor room facing inward—was mysteriously changed to a vulnerable second floor room with a balcony. Who changed this?

Another incident that we discovered shortly after the assassination was that the security team that had been assigned since June 1966 to Martin King whenever he came to Memphis, had been pulled out.

I had met the team shortly after they were assigned because I was picking up Dr. King at the airport, in June of 1966. They introduced themselves to me, and then to Dr. King. It was a black squad of eight detectives who were under orders that nothing should ever seriously happen to Dr. King when he visited Memphis. That security squad was removed for the first time in his April 1968 visit to Memphis. Not in his March visit, but in his April visit.

Surveillance teams of police that were deployed from the fire station, across from the motel, were pulled out. Police surveillance of the motel, and patrol cars that went around the community while King was in town, were removed.

As my wife and I talked about these matters, we became quite suspicious. We verified during that period that there were bugs in all the phones. Then when James Earl Ray was picked up, I recall very clearly his petitions to the court to relieve him of the way in which he was being incarcerated. He called it torture. And he said it was making him sick. I remember those reports. I could kick myself that I did not go to the court hearings and challenge them. I thought, as I read those newspaper reports, that they were brainwashing him. I asked myself the question, "Why are they doing this? If this is the murderer, do they not have the evidence to pin it on him clearly? Why is this necessary?"

Another thing, of course, was that the FBI had been trailing King wherever he went by this time. They called him the Number One enemy of the country. They said that King had to be nullified.

I became persuaded that with such factors as these, we were probably not going to get a good investigation from the FBI, who took it over from the Memphis police. The homicide department of the Memphis police at that time, I learned much later, had about a ninety percent solve ratio on the murders that occurred in Memphis—a better record in murder than the FBI has ever had.

RD: So what is the thesis of this new book by William Pepper, *Orders to Kill*?

JL: William Pepper was a friend of Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy long before that, of course, and became involved in the case at the request of Ralph Abernathy. Informally, he maintained an interest in it, followed the literature, and did his own quiet investigations. In 1988, James Earl Ray asked him to become his lawyer. He agreed to do so, and of course continued the investigation. William Pepper has sought, as a defense lawyer, to build the case for a proper trial for James Earl Ray, which he has never had. He put together the book as a way of getting this investigation before the public. The book describes the investigation of this assassination and shows that Ray did not do the shooting. The book not only unpacks what his investigation has discovered, but does so with the corroboration of witnesses (though he doesn't give all those names in the book), and new evidence. There is compelling new evidence—it's old, of course, because it happened in 1968—but it's new, because it's never been in the public before nor in a court record. Much of it is not in the official investigation of the FBI, in the investigation of the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1977, or in the Justice Department's review of the investigation by the FBI. Pepper informs the public about the innocence of Ray.

The investigation, basically, solves the murder. He does not name the murderer, because his aim is to go into court. But though he does not specifically name the murderer, the assassin is in the book. And in the continuing investigation since the book, this is being confirmed. We know some of the major

players in that assassination plot. And they are named, though a handful are named fictitiously, because in the investigation, it was agreed not to reveal some names because it would put their lives in danger.



RD: And basically, Pepper says that James Earl Ray was framed?

JL: Yes. James Earl Ray was the pawn. One of the major figures involved in the plot, who is named specifically, when he was approached to become a part of the plot and to do some of the local work, was assured that he did not need to worry about getting caught or arrested, because they had a fall guy already in place, who would be accused of the crime. He was assured of this, in the very initial conversations. That man, who is named in the book, has gone to the DA in Memphis, through a lawyer, asking for immunity from prosecution for his part in the plot.

The District Attorney of Shelby County in Memphis, Tennessee is playing the game that he's investigated all this, knew all about this, and that all of this is nonsense. That, of course, is typical of DAs in capital crimes. When they have an innocent man, they pretend that they've investigated all the angles,

refusing to use the responsibility of their office to see to it that the innocent are not wrongly confined for that which they have not done.

RD: Who does Pepper maintain are the individuals or groups or agencies behind the framing of Ray and the assassination?

JL: The orders to kill Martin King were seen at the highest levels of government. The FBI was involved in this, as well as military intelligence. The local police were involved in it, peripherally. And very likely, from all the evidence, known crime figures were involved. We are of the mind, on the basis of the investigation, that it was indeed known crime figures, together with the FBI, who succeeded in carrying out the assassination.

RD: What do you think was their basic reason for wanting King murdered?

JL: The analysis in both military intelligence and the FBI was that King was the most dangerous person in the country. Military intelligence has had a long history of paranoia about the Negro American. According to investigations entirely independent of this book, military intelligence began keeping a watch over Negro Americans in World War I, convinced that we were a ripe field for treason against the United States by joining with the Kaiser. In WWII, they said the Nazis could easily attract us! [laughing] Martin King himself was the product—and this has been documented—of seventy-five years of surveillance by US military intelligence. His grandfather, A.D. Williams, his father, M.L.K. Senior, and Martin, were all under the surveillance of the military intelligence in the United States. Seventy-five years of it.

Pepper did not under cover that. That was done by a Memphis investigative reporter and was printed on March 21, 1993 in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, as a front-page story. It confirms the involvement of military intelligence in spying on Negro Americans, and many other Americans as well. But especially on Martin King, who was followed wherever he went.

continued on next page

According to that investigation, there were at least two military intelligence units in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

A decision was probably made sometime during October of 1967 that he could not be permitted to bring the Poor People's Campaign into Washington, DC. With the widespread dissent and unrest in the country, that mere fact could topple the government. That analysis was agreed upon at the highest level. A military, interdepartmental SOG—Special Operations Group—was put into place to carry out those orders.

The other thing that should be said about this is that by this time, the fall of 1967, King was clearly the major voice from America offering the world peace and justice and hope in solidarity with one another. He had become the symbol—not only of justice in the United States for people of color, to African-Americans, Hispanics, the poor, native Americans, and women, as well as many civil and political leaders—but he had become also the symbol of the many people in the country who wanted the Vietnam War to end. I maintain that at that point of the unity between the peace and the King movements in their commonality of concern, that that's when—out of the paranoia in Washington DC in high circles—the orders were framed and given. And actually, the book names the key players in those orders, one of whom is very much alive.

RD: Why has a relatively small publisher put out this book, and why has it gotten so little attention here (although there was a review and an op ed piece in the *London Observer*)?

JL: Actually, William Pepper had a contract with a major publisher long before he had begun to write this book. The book represents his own frustration as a lawyer trying to get into court. He hoped that it would help to impact public opinion, to break the ice of the DA in Shelby County and permit a court process to go forward. That major publisher read the book, in all of its stages, was pleased with it, and planned to make it a bestseller. But Pepper was asked to take a key chapter out of the book, a chapter

that he thought helped to complete the investigation. He refused. They would not compromise with him, and he would not compromise with them. They even told him, at the time, that if he would drop this chapter, "we will make this book a bestseller."

So what is going on, is the way in which the press have a very narrow definition of what is important and what is news. The right of the people to be well-informed is not in the mind of many of the press. So you're quite right: there has been, to this date, no major review of the book in any major publication in the United States. There have been a few radio broadcasts, of Pepper and about the book, including a couple of interviews I've done out on the West Coast. There is some evidence that independent electronic media are beginning to pick it up. A number of voices, such as Jesse Jackson's, have been raised to that effect. But basically, there has been an effort to suppress this book—a book which indicates that a man in jail for the assassination of King is in fact innocent.

There's still time for the nation to redress the wrong. And then, to direct itself to finding the real plot, and who the actual assassin is.

RD: How do you think the assassination has affected US history?

JL: Well, my own thesis is that the politics of assassination in the 1960s has changed America forever. It seems to be clear that the Roosevelt era of presidency and the New Deal measures that were passed on behalf of people generally, and the reforms of the King movement, were moving the federal government towards a place in which the people, the quality of life, and justice and opportunity and equal access to opportunity, were going to become the business of the government. Historically, in the United States that has always been fought—not only by the states' righters, but also by big business, which sees big business as the main business of government.

It is my contention that the assassination was related to the effort to turn the government around. Which is what happened. It

permitted the Jesse Helmses of the world (who opposed all that I've mentioned now, in terms of the New Deal and the King movement) to find their opening and to make a way to make a comeback, to insist that states' rights—not human rights, not the preamble of the Constitution—are the basis for federal government and state government. Some who were elected president would never have been elected president had Robert and John F. Kennedy lived, and if King had lived.

In 1967-68, there was a broad coalition of people who were urging King to run as an independent candidate in 1968. It was well known that King was giving it serious thought and consideration. He was exposed to a fair amount of conversation from a broad spectrum of people from many walks of life in the United States, saying that someone like him needed to offer himself for the presidency. Whether he would have done that, had he lived, I have not the slightest notion. But I do know that it was being considered.

The assassinations of the 1960s changed the country forever. I think that this assassination of Martin King can be seen as an opportunity for repentance and unpacking the lies and the deceit, so that the country can face itself from a perspective of its own democratic values. Otherwise, I have great fear for the future of my land and my people.

RD: What are the implications for the future of the movements for peace and justice for all, if this remains covered up?

JL: If it becomes known, I think that it is very possible that the people of the United States will demand that Congress and the federal government reassess themselves and what they are, and how these things could happen. Secondly, I think that if we get this case in court, it could well cause a reexamination of the whole politics of assassination.

William Pepper is pressing the legal remedies. There is a civil suit that's been filed against two of the major plotters in the city of Memphis. There is a criminal *habeas corpus* case that the criminal court

judge, who's heard the initial motion, is saying he's going to hear. Against the weight of the Memphis political apparatus, he has said for over a year that there must be a court hearing. I find the fear of the DA and even of the governor of Tennessee, of just simply having a court hearing of this matter in a criminal court, reflective of the fact that they know that they've tried to bury it. They've tried to convince African-Americans and America in general that they have the killer in prison, even though they know they do not.

RD: To sum this up, do you have an appeal to make to the readers of *Fellowship*, and to the wider social change movement?

JL: Well, I think all of us in the movement of nonviolence and all of us in the movement of soul force—all of us who have deep spiritual foundations for our analysis of violence and nonviolence and for our analysis of the social/political scene in America—must begin to recognize that this book represents an opportunity for us to reopen the past, which continues to pollute the present. We need to see it as a part of the movement for the renewal of our society. We may not have many such opportunities that can have that kind of impact on the mind and the character of America. But while we're thinking so intently about the meanness in the public arena coming out of the political and the business communities—as well as many religious folk—those of us who are concerned for the healing of the nation might very well decide that there has to be a high priority.

If the nation can shoot down a prophet, then what movement of righteousness for our nation can be safe? What hope is there for the people of America to move toward a nation where in fact racism gets displaced by a real sense of brotherhood and sisterhood? Where greed and policies of greed get checked by policies of justice? What hope is it that this can be fulfilled?

This kind of crucifixion demands the repentance of the nation. If it goes unanswered, with only a King holiday to celebrate, then I think the future may

be very frightening. But I feel strongly that we are going to succeed in getting this before the public. And if we do, I think it will mean that we lift, in many ways, new dimensions of hope and potential for a new future.

RD: You know, in the aftermath of the military dictatorships in South America, the movements to uncover the lies, the violence, the killings by the previous regimes, have helped to lance the poisoned social fabric of the various countries.

JL: Yes, exactly.

RD: They've discovered that just the process of discovering the truth has cleansing power.

JL: Absolutely! There are no ten ways about that in my mind. To lance the poison and the sores that are festering here in the body politic, in the character of America, is, in fact, the only way towards health. And I think that uncovering the truth of the King assassination, more than any other event, can possibly help this nation, and make that a reality.

RD: The healing power of the truth.

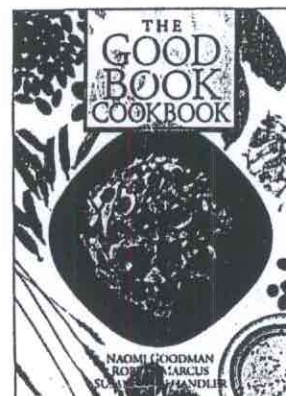
JL: The healing possibilities of truth, yes. If the American people were asked to vote on the crucifixion of King, they would have voted No.

RD: Of course.

JL: And certain people decided that they were going to protect the American people by plotting the assassination. I think this is an opportunity for the American people to recognize that they must uncover the facts of this case. If not for their own sake, then for the sake of the health and the future of this nation. I remember so often what Thomas Jefferson said: "I tremble for my nation when I realize that God is just." □

Orders to Kill: The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King, by William Pepper; Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 260 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10001, 537 pp., hardcover. Available from FOR for \$28 plus \$2.75 postage.

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